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AUTHOR Brown, James I.
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ABSTRACT

The first step in arriving at techniques for the improvement of reading rate is the careful and thoughtful formulation of a specific objective. Once a reading rate objective has been phrased, the next step is to examine all available resources of help in reaching that objective. These resources include films for use with regular motion picture projectors, films for use with special projectors, and vocabulary-building aids in film, television, slide, card, or textbook form. The next step is determining exactly what techniques are best. Here student feedback is crucial, for, to be effective, all techniques must be solidly grounded on an exact awareness of which student and teacher attitudes are helps and which are hindrances or roadblocks. Motivational techniques are also important considerations for increasing students' reading rates. Some possible means of motivation include active self-discoveries and visual expeditors. Some specific instructional techniques teachers can use include pacing, determining the best practice rate, using specialized reading-type skills, and asking pupils to keep individual progress sheets. (WR)

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James I. Brown
Department of Rhetoric
University of Minnesota
St. Paul, Minnesota 55101

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TECHNIQUES FOR INCREASING READING RATE

(To be presented on "Perspectives on Efficient Reading," August 13, 1974)

For teachers of reading, today's tremendous proliferation of printed material is a dramatic reminder of the need for increased reading rates. This veritable avalanche of print necessitates a closer examination of any and all techniques for meeting that need. My special concern in this paper is with techniques especially useful with students at the senior high, college, and adult levels in the classroom teaching of efficient reading. Within this context, a strong pragmatic orientation seems indispensable.

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Formulating an Objective

The first step in arriving at techniques for the improvement of rate is to formulate carefully and thoughtfully a specific objective. As a sample, take the one used in the Efficient Reading course at the University of Minnesota:

> Objective: To help each student develop the maximum rate possible, without significant loss of comprehension.

This statement of objective is intentionally open-ended so as to encourage maximum progress and provide desirable latitude for individual differences. After all, while a typical college class initially averages around 250 words-per-minute with 60 percent comprehension, the range may be from 160 to 420 words-per-minute, with comprehension of from 20 to 90 percent.

Checking Available Aids

Once a reading rate objective has been phrased to your complete satisfaction, you will, as a next step, want to examine all available resources of help in reaching that objective. These, by and large, are so well-publicized and so ubiquitous that they need only cursory mention here. They include films for use with regular motion picture projectors, such as the Harvard, Iowa, or Purdue films, and films for use with special projectors, as with the Perceptoscope or Controlled Reader. They include various kinds of accelerators, with shades, wires or lights to hasten the eyes down a printed page. They include tachistoscopes for sharpening perceptual skills and increasing span. And not to be overlooked are vocabulary-building aids in film, TV, slide, card or textbook

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form. The Substrata-Factor research by Holmes and Singer indicates that vocabulary deserves predominant emphasis, since it contributes 51 percent to reading speed--far more than any other first-order factor.

Aids vs Techniques

With this profusion of aids for increasing rate, how important are techniques? A look at the first adult classes in reading taught at Minnesota back in 1949 suggest an answer. At that time we were using two aids--a tachistoscope and the Harvard Films, with accompanying readings. That very first class averaged initially 213 words-per-minute with 79 percent comprehension. By the end of the course they had progressed to 519 words-per-minute but with a disappointing drop to 55 percent comprehension.

For the very next class, the same teacher used the same aids, materials, and tests. One change was made. Some new techniques were added. Initially that second class averaged 283 words-per-minute with 70 percent comprehension. Final results were 721 words-per-minute with 66 percent comprehension.

In short, the first class read 2.4 times faster with a loss of 24 percent in comprehension. The next class read 2.5 times faster with only a 4 percent loss. Such evidence suggests that while teaching aids are indeed important, the techniques we use with those aids are even more important.

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Identifying Attitudes

You have now set an objective, surveyed available aids, and recognized the vital importance of techniques. What comes next? Determining exactly what techniques are best. And that depends on knowing your students and yourself well. For all techniques, to be effective, must perforce be solidly grounded on an exact awareness of which student and teacher attitudes are helps and which are hindrances or roadblocks. Here, student feedback is crucial.

Take one of our students, for example. Initially he was reading at 170 words-per-minute with 30 percent comprehension. In over a week he had moved up only to 190 words-per-minute. When I suggested he try a faster speed, he shook his head. "I don't get much even when I read slowly and carefully. I wouldn't get anything if I went any faster." That remark revealed his personal roadblock. Until that was removed, no teaching aid could do much.

Only when such attitudes are identified and catalogued can you begin to develop specific techniques to circumvent their deleterious effect. This suggests building a checklist of such roadblocks. Used at the beginning of the course to identify problems, it provides invaluable help in selecting or devising appropriate techniques. Repeated at the end, it serves equally well to evaluate your sucess in meeting these needs.

Presently we use a checklist of some thirteen possible reasons for difficulty with rate. Students check the one which seems most apropos. This past quarter, "Fear of missing something" was most frequently checked--by 53 percent initially, by only 22 percent at the end. "Lack of confidence" was checked by 38 percent initially, by less

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than 1 percent at the end.

Student attitudes help or hinder in achieving objectives but so do teacher attitudes toward students and their capabilities.

Research by Rosenthal, first with mice, then with grade-school children, has led to the concept of "self-fulfilling prophecy." According to that research, teachers communicate very subtly their own attitudes and expectations toward individuals in their class, leading them to perform better--or worse--than otherwise.

Consider the implications of that research for teachers of reading. For example, if a teacher is absolutely convinced that 800 words-per-minute is the top limit as a reading rate, class results would tend to reflect that limiting attitude. Or, take a teacher who is skeptical about the effectiveness of a certain teaching aid. That skepticism will tend to permeate his efforts and be communicated to his students, vitiating the effectiveness of that aid.

Evidence bearing on this theory accidentally surfaced in our own program. A relatively new teacher taught a section of reading for the class hour devoted solely to the developing of scanning speed and accuracy. Fourteen scanning practice problems were planned, interspersed with suggested tips for increased efficiency. Normally by the end of the hour students are scanning at an average top rate of about 15,500 words-per-minute with excellent accuracy. The new teacher was not told what to expect and was quite pleased with his results--an average of 2,161 words-per-minute on identical problems. Without realizing it, he had apparently conveyed to his students his belief

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that 2,000 words-per-minute was about all that could be expected.

As can be seen, any techniques for increasing reading rate must be solidly based on insights drawn from careful evaluation of student and teacher attitudes if they are to bring maximum results. In one sense, this step may be more important than the actual techniques themselves. Once a proper foundation is laid, everything done during each class hour for the entire course will tend to fall into place. Separate technique minutiae will combine to make larger constellations.

Motivational Techniques

At this point, suppose we examine some sample or model constellations to suggest the many possibilities.

Active Self-Discoveries. The first might go under the name Active Self-Discoveries. This involves translating information normally conveyed by lecture into a heuristic or self-discovery form to generate heightened interest and more active involvement. The difference between being told and discovering something for ourselves is cardinal. Keats catches so well the excitement of discovery in his sonnet, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," a portion of those realms of gold making up the reading teacher's domain. Furthermore so much of what goes on in a reading class can easily be translated or re-structured into this general technique format.

For example, suppose you want to explain how, as a person now increases his rate, he soon reaches a top limit. Any faster and he would have to start skimming or skipping. With data from preceding classes

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you could easily and accurately tell students what that demarkation line would be, on the average--336 words-per-minute.

Translate that into an Active Self-Discovery technique, however, and enjoy the quickened interest and enthusiasm. You raise the question. Your students discover the answer. Just give them these directions. Read the directed selection at your absolute top reading rate. Don't skip. Don't skim. Read every single word, but at your present top rate. The resulting figure will, for you, therefore, mark your exact upper reading limit, beyond which you must begin to skim or scan.

This one example should suggest how to re-structure much of what is done in class into Active Self-Discovery form.

Visual Expeditors. The second general type of motivational techniques might be labeled Visual Expeditors. These involve translating information into visual form, sometimes in combination with the heuristic. To time students, for example, when reading articles in class, teachers sometimes write on the blackboard or use a slide or transparency with reading time in minutes and seconds indicated.

It takes only a slight restructuring to translate that practice into a true Visual Expeditor. Instead of reading time in minutes and seconds, convert that information into a direct word-per-minute reading figure. When a student looks up after completing an article he immediately knows his word-per-minute rate. Take this a step further. If the figures go up only to 800 words-per-minute, students will be encouraged to consider that an upper limit. If the figures go up to 1,200 words-per-minute, a different expectancy is communicated. Such

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Visual Expeditors play an important role, evidenced by the quick raising of student heads to check the figures.

1,000 Club. Perhaps the most useful Visual Expeditor for our adult classes has been the 1000 Club card, a small card which fits nicely into a billfold. The club is described to the class a little past the half-way mark in the course, when interest for some may tend to lag. This Club is unique in that it has no meetings, no dues, no officers, and no responsibilities--just honor. Any student who achieves at a certain level receives a signed card which reads as follows:

THE 1,000 CLUB
OFFICIAL MEMBERSHIP CARD

This is to certify that

_____

has achieved a reading speed of 1,000 words a minute or faster with a comprehension of 80 percent or better in the University of Minnesota's course in "Efficient Reading," Rhetoric 1147.

Date: _____
Attested: _____
(Instructor)

Instructional Techniques

Next, let us turn from motivational techniques to an examination of sample instructional techniques.

Pacing. This is perhaps the most common and certainly one of the most useful techniques for increasing rate. Pacing is predicated on the theory that we can do things under pressure that would be impossible otherwise. Pacing is the underlying principle at work in all reading

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films and accelerators. Furthermore, by using a stop watch and spoken commands, any teacher may pace any individual or entire class through any selection at a desired rate. Since pacing is so well-known, no further amplication is needed here.

Determining the Best Practice Rate. This instructional assignment of the Active Self-Discovery type involves the reading of seven selections. Students graph their results, noting interrelationships between rate and comprehension, the two variables graphed. They are told to read the first selection very slowly and then to read each of the remaining six from 75 to 125 words-per-minute faster than the preceding one, despite any adverse affect on comprehension. The resulting graph should reveal, among other things, their present optimum practice rate. A secondary value is in removing the common attitudinal barrier summed up in the phrase, "the faster you read, the less you comprehend."

For about seventy percent of the students, their best comprehension is not at their slowest rate. The graph makes that point nicely, freeing them from undesirable stereotypes and attitudes which limit progress. The assignment also generates added reliance on the self-discovery technique.

It is relatively easy to get each student to circle his best comprehension score or scores and make the point that optimum results come from practicing beyond the rate at which he comprehended best. Practicing what you do well stops progress, just as additional hunt-and-peck typing keeps you from mastery of the touch system.

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Using Specialized Reading-Type Skills. Still another technique involves the teaching of such specialized skills as surveying or overviewing, skimming and scanning. These are important skills in their own right and deserve to be taught. Our concern here is to teach them in such a way that they make a major contribution to increasing reading rate.

Sequence is of particular importance. For example, when introducing skimming as a reading-type activity, have the class skim an article immediately after doing a timed reading. This insures meaningful comparisons. After providing complete directions as to how skimming is done, you raise the question, "Exactly how do reading and skimming rates differ and what about resulting differences in comprehension?" Use a timing slide with suitably high rate figures to reinforce the expected rate advantage. Later, whenever additonal skimming practice is scheduled, fit it in immediately before a timed reading. Students will soon notice the accelerating effect of that juxtaposition and take advantage of it in organizing their out-of-class reading to better advantage.

Surveying and scanning can be treated in the same way and used as rate accelerators as well as skills in their own right.

Individual Progress Sheet. One last technique involves a specially-designed, single-page record sheet with space for entering records of every reading activity. The sheet is organized so as to present a developing picture of progress as well as to pinpoint difficulties. Each student picks up his sheet when he comes in, makes entries during class, and leaves it afterwards. The teacher has an accurate check of

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class progress as well as of individual problems needing attention. This sheet serves admirably to draw together a multitude of technique minutiae into larger and more meaningful constellations.

Results

In conclusion, a capsule look at results from three quite different structurings of Efficient Reading (Rhetoric 1147) provides added perspective for evaluating the kinds of techniques discussed.

1) Regular version: 3 credits. Meets for 30 45-minute periods (22½ hours of class time). This version involves direct student-teacher interaction, as described.

2) Independent Study cassette version: 3 credits. No classroom time. Lectures, timing and pacing tapes, texts and study guide provide instruction. Sixty-two students have enrolled since its recent inception. This version involves no face-to-face contact--only mail contact with the lessons.

3) Independent Study TV version: 3 credits. Twelve 30-minute TV lessons--six hours of viewing. This version has had over 22,000 paid enrollments from open or closed circuit broadcasting. It provides a visual instructor but no live face-to-face relationship--only mail contact for the lessons.

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Results

Version 1		Version 2		Version 3	
Initial	Final	Initial	Final	Initial	Final
rate comp	rate comp	rate comp	rate comp	rate comp	rate comp
252 - 63%	1548-62%	314 - 72%	889- 74%	293 - 64%	903 - 66%
6.1 times faster		2.8 times faster		3.0 times faster	

For the visual TV medium, it was possible to multiply the use of Visual Expeditors, achieving unexpectedly good results considering the limited six-hour viewing time, results which point up the efficacy of such expeditors.

Finally, let me quote Hallock Hoffman--flier, sculptor, and photographer. He once divided mankind into the "quick and the dead." In his view the quick"are people who can hear questions" and the dead "are people who know answers." The quick are the pioneers, feeling the spell of unknown frontiers--the tug of discovery. The dead are settled stolidly into the comfort of a tidy, well-explained questionless world.

Hopefully you should consider this paper, not an answer but a question, leading you on to those further self-discoveries which make teaching the genuinely satisfying experience it is.